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Holger Schmitt. Phonetic transcription: From first steps to ear transcription

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Holger Schmitt. *Phonetic Transcription: From First Steps to Ear Transcription*. Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2011, 183 pp.

This volume offers a detailed account of phonetic transcription from a linguistic point of view, more than 80 exercises relating to different levels of difficulty including solutions, practical tips with respect to common difficulties as well as links to online solutions and websites from which computer tools such as phonetic fonts and applications (IPA sounds) can be downloaded. It is thus much more than just a practical guide to transcription, as the title might suggest.

The book is divided into four parts: the foundations of transcriptions and the three independent, self-contained practical sections on "basic transcription," "advanced transcription" and "transcribing actual speech." Furthermore the book is supplemented with lists of abbreviations and notation conventions, exercises, IPA symbols, the standard lexical set introduced by Wells (1982)¹ and a survey of pronouncing dictionaries.

The section on "Does transcription matter?" is a very strong, detailed and well-structured claim on why not only students of linguistics but also EFL teachers and students should learn to transcribe, as "[y]ou cannot afford to (or at least should not) teach English in a school setting [...] using words whose pronunciation you are not sure of" (19), and thus one has to be able to look up the pronunciation of words in a dictionary. Secondly, transcribing helps the development of an awareness of the pronunciation of English and an understanding of one's own pronunciation and thirdly, for many linguistic disciplines such as phonetics and phonology, morphology, language acquisition, clinical and forensic linguistics, sociolinguistics, varieties of English, etc. "transcription is not a luxury but an essential tool" (20). This section should be compulsory reading for all those authorities who would like to abolish phonetics and phonology as part of the undergraduate curriculum. The following sections on "Transcription outside linguistics," "Spelling vs. sound" and especially "What is phonetic transcription" are valuable contributions, written in such a way that they can be understood by lay persons and undergraduates without prior knowledge of phonetics and phonology. They supplement the statements made in the first section. The sections on "The International Phonetic Alphabet" provides some useful internet links to downloadable IPA fonts and sound files. "Choosing a pronunciation dictionary" might not be very relevant to undergraduate students but offers some help to lecturers in reaching a decision on what dictionary or what transcription system to apply in their courses. The same is probably true for the outline of the two reference accents, Received Pronunciation (RP) and General American (GA), which are both covered in the practical sections.

Each of the three following sections consists of a background part and a practice part. Section A, "Basic transcription," explains the phonemic principle, the "major principle in transcription" (35), starting by introducing Wells' (1982) Standard Lexical Set, supplemented with the [i] sound as in happy and the [u] sound as in influence. The table given on page 38 is so important that it should have been entered in an appendix or together with the other lists. As this set only covers the vowel sounds, a reference

1 Wells, John. *Accents of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982.

to Pullum and Ladusaw's (1986) *Phonetic Symbol Guide*² would have been useful. In the subsection on "The choice of symbols" Schmitt in a linguistically sound way justifies his decisions on which symbols he uses. However, the text is beyond any student who is untrained in phonetics and phonology. Although Schmitt's decisions are understandable, I would have preferred him to have stuck to one of the three major pronouncing dictionaries and referred to the differences given on page 29. I know from experience that the slightest deviation from the dictionary they use confuses the students.

The best and most useful part is "Some practical advice," which covers all major difficulties students have when starting to learn how to transcribe phonemically. I trust that if they follow the points mentioned, they will make rapid progress. The 37 exercises given in the practice section gradually lead the students from the transcription of single vowel phonemes to the phonemic transcription of words, including homophones and homographs. Apart from the exercises themselves, there is a characterisation in phonetic terms, typical graphemic representations as well as less common spellings for every symbol. Additionally, detailed explanations are given for the transcription of inflectional affixes (-s and -ed) and the dental fricatives, which are very useful, especially for German speakers.

Section B, "Advanced Transcription," deals with the broad phonetic transcription of sentences and texts. The difference between the three types of transcription is explained in great detail in the background part. However, the text presupposes advanced knowledge in phonetics and phonology and might not be easily accessible to students. The sections on "transcription conventions and transcription tolerance" as well as the one on weak forms, including the table given on pages 85-88, on the other hand, are very useful, even for beginners. The following 35 exercises again lead the student from simple sentences to more difficult texts, always commenting on the problems that might be encountered.

Section C, "Transcribing actual speech," mainly deals with ear transcription, i.e. transcribing actual speech, and is meant for very advanced students. The background section explains how relevant phonetic knowledge is for ear transcription, what factors influence auditory perception and how to analyse unfamiliar sounds or unknown languages and how to interpret data. It provides a rough overview of different areas of phonetics and phonology and their relevance for transcription, but the respective knowledge has to be acquired elsewhere. The 12 exercises in this section are mostly based on actual speech samples which are downloadable from the web. If a student is able to do these exercises, s/he will be very advanced in using and applying transcriptions on all levels and for different purposes.

This volume is not meant as a text book for a course in transcription but, as the author states, it "is meant to be a companion throughout your life as an undergraduate or even graduate student" (15). It might be relevant at different stages and in different settings, and thus I think that it belongs on the reference shelf of anyone involved in linguistics.

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2 Pullum, Geoffrey K. and William A. Ladusaw. *Phonetic Symbol Guide*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.